

Daughters of the Digital Empire

Book One of
Moonlight Hearts

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And Margaret Lovelace

Chapter 7: New Beginnings

Back in my room, Amy helped me out of the dress. I blushed again. The thought of Amy seeing me in a state of undress banished my foul mood. I had angered my best friend by standing up for her. And I hadn't even meant to do it. And now she saw me as her rival. I had done everything I hadn't want to do. But under the gaze of my beautiful maid, those feelings melted away.

"I'm not looking," Amy said.

"I wasn't objecting." I answered, still cherry red.

"It isn't appropriate. Not since we know that we both like the ladies." but I saw her sneak a glance upward.

"I know," I said, then a thought crossed my mind like a jaywalker on meth. I was guessing here. But I was confident in my guess. I was sure Amy hadn't confided about her sexuality to the rival before I got here.

"You know," I said, "You didn't bring up your interest in the feminine form at any time in the last three years either."

Amy blushed and didn't say anything. I smiled. I'd been right.

It took a minute before Amy found her voice, "Why did you call Lady Carolynn your best friend? I mean she can't be your best friend. I'd barely call her your friend at all."

I had prepared for this question. As soon as I called Lynn my best friend out loud, I knew somebody would call me on it.

I smiled, "Can you think of another friend I have? When one friend is all you've got, that person becomes your best friend by default."

Amy stopped moving and then whispered, "That is so sad."

"I did it to myself. I'm always alone. No matter how many people are around me. I don't have relationships. I have transactions, and I'm sick of it."

Amy put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. I smiled and touched my hand to hers. I had stayed single for the majority of college. I'd had the occasional one-night stand. I'd even tried sleeping with a boy once, so I could tell my family that I had tried to be straight. Not that it helped, with my family or being straight.

I took a minute to appreciate that the game designers had decided to go with modern underwear. Corsets excluded. This bust they had saddled me with would have been excruciating without a modern bra. Amy handed me a fern green shift dress and I pulled it on, shaking my head as I did. This style of shift dress appeared in the 1920s. But here it was being used as casual attire between major events by the game designers. Still, it was comfortable, and I appreciated that. Amy helped me into a pair of lemon-yellow kitten heels. I removed my garnet ring, but otherwise kept the same jewelry.

"Lynn is going to get herself hurt," I said as I struggled with the dress. "If she manages to get engaged to Wulfric, she might even get herself killed."

Amy nodded, "I've heard the stories. He scares me."

"But that's Lynn all over. She has a martyr complex so big that you could drive a truck through it."

"A what?" Amy asked.

"Never mind," I said. "The point is that she doesn't see value in herself except as a sacrifice for others. She's been that way as long as I've known her."

"I don't know Lady Carolynn well. But she has always seemed generous."

"She is," I adjusted the dress until it hung right. The dress hung down to my knees. I turned to Amy and asked, "How do I look?"

"Amazing." Amy responded.

I smiled, and then I said, "I wanted to thank you for your help in the great hall. You had my back there, and I want you to know how much it means to me. You didn't have to do it. I didn't deserve it. But you made an enormous difference by being there for me."

"I have served you for three years, and yet I feel as though I've met you for the first time today." Amy said, "Lady Ren, may I say something impertinent?"

"We're alone, please call me Ren," I answered, "And you may always be impertinent when we are alone."

"Then, Ren, let me say that it is as though I have met some new lady. Everything I know about you is wrong. I did not like who you were. But I find myself adoring who you are now. I find myself overjoyed with who you are now."

My heart grew butterfly wings and began flying around in my chest.

Amy continued, "I know this makes no sense, but you are so different that I can't think of you as the same person."

"I feel the same way about myself." I said, "Who I was yesterday seems like a bad dream."

I considered what to say next. How to word what I wanted to say? I don't want to lie to her, but I couldn't tell her the truth. How would I explain it? And did I even need to explain it?

"I have felt conflicted about my behavior for some time," I continued. "When I woke up this morning, the conflict was gone. But not in the way the old me would have expected. I could not be who I was. I considered it. I will admit. But I couldn't do it anymore. But I still behaved that way once. And I wouldn't hold it against you if you still hated me for the person I was. "

Amy blushed, "I hated my old mistress. But I am already quite taken with my new mistress."

I blushed again as well.

"It seemed as though you were quite taken with Countess Fiona Myrddhin," Amy said, looking away for a moment. She hesitated as she spoke, "Were you thinking of courting her? She would be a good match. Your social standing is close. Your houses would both gain from the marriage. I have no idea if she has any romantic interest in women. But I can see her being agreeable to such a marriage. That is, as long as you did not oppose her seeking out somebody who could give her an heir."

I gagged at the mention of obtaining an heir. I hadn't thought about that. It didn't matter that I was gay. It didn't matter that Ys was gay positive in its outlook. I was a noble. And I was a woman. House Octavian expected their daughter to produce an heir. And Ys did not have in vitro fertilization. Did they have turkey basters in this world? Something to consider down the road. I noticed that Amy had gone silent while I lost myself in thought.

"I'm sorry." I said, "The prospect of having to get pregnant to fulfill my duty to House Octavian distracted me. The process is horrifying. I didn't hear much after that."

"I was asking a question." Amy said, "Do you plan to woo the Countess Fiona?"

"She would be a good match," I agreed. "And I have it on good authority that she likes both men and ladies, so I would be in with a shot there. But," I paused.

"But?" Amy asked.

"I know we've recently found ourselves on good terms. And I know it's foolish to think of us as anything right now, save mistress and servant. But pursuing her feels like a betrayal of you."

Amy smiled, "I understand. I'm feeling it too. And I agree that it's foolish. But I can't help but feel that way as well. And it's wonderful to hear you say it to me."

"So, what do we do? My family does expect me to marry a noble. And Fiona is the best choice at the moment. And then there's you and me. I'm conflicted about our relationship, even leaving our feelings aside. I'm a noble. And you're a commoner. And worse, I'm your mistress."

"I'd be happy to even that scale, by becoming your mistress as well." Amy said, a smile forming on her blushing face.

I gasped in shock. And then I gasped again as a shiver wracked my body. "Why? I've been terrible to you."

"I've always thought you were breathtaking. And you are so different now. And that difference is why I'm saying this. I can't believe I'm saying it. I can't believe I'm offering. But this new you is magnetic."

"I don't deserve a second chance." I shuddered.

"And yet, I can't help but give you one. Maybe you're simply too beautiful. It's scandalous of course," Amy said, hands clasped before her. "But it's normal for the nobility to take lovers. It's less common for women to do so. But nobody will object. They'll gossip. But you've never been afraid of scandals. But maybe you are now."

"They might do more than that," I answered, "But as for scandals, I'm not worried about scandals. I'm worried about your heart. I couldn't bear to toy with your feelings like that."

"I'm willing to risk that." Amy said, "And in any case, we're getting ahead of ourselves. You are not married to Countess Fiona. You are not even courting her. The scandal will be so much less at this stage. We can afford to test this new relationship." She paused and looked away.

Turning back, she continued, "That is, if you want to test it."

"I'm not good at relationships of any kind." I said.

"I disagree. You came to your cousin's defense despite the power Prince Wulfric holds. You protected her interests, even when she was willing to sacrifice herself for Ys. That is very noble."

"And now she's furious with me." I reminded Amy.

"Yes. That is my point. If you hadn't changed, that would have been an easy opportunity. You could have let Lady Carolynn take the fall and marry Wulfric. He is looking for a wife. And despite his royal status, people are leery after the death of his last fiancée. He might decide to pick you if he found himself denied other avenues. Hyperborea wants an alliance with Ys. Everyone knows they want to gain influence with Ys."

I flinched. It hadn't occurred to me that I would also be at risk of betrothal to Prince Red Flag.

"Do you think Lynn was thinking the same thing as you were? Do you think she intends to protect me as well?"

“I assume that is part of her reasoning. She is willing to sacrifice herself for commoners she has not met. I have no doubt she would sacrifice herself for her cousin.”

I hadn't considered that option, a thought which filled me with shame. “I've been so selfish.”

“You are not selfish. Not anymore,” Amy said. “Backing her decision would have made you look like a loyal cousin. It would leave Fiona open for you. It would prevent Wulfric from threatening either yourself or Ys. You opposed the engagement, despite the obvious benefit. And I realized that I could depend upon your loyalty. That is when I became infatuated with you.”

“You make me sound so much better than I am.”

“I hated you until this day. I assure you. I am only describing how I see you now.”

“And how do you see me now?”

“I see somebody I want to kiss.”

That sounded like an invitation to me. I took two steps forward and took her face in my hands. She was luminescent as I leaned in. With my face an inch away from hers, she gasped. She closed her eyes and waited.

This was a bad idea. My brain was screaming at me. I knew how much class discrimination dominated the cultural perception in Ys. I knew the scandal, if anyone caught us, would be much worse than Amy had pretended. I risked expulsion from my house if I did this. And I had to assume that I was never leaving this world. I had to think about my own safety. I had to think about my own future.

I pressed my lips against hers and we kissed. Amy shuddered and melted at my touch. I moved my hands around her waist to support Amy as her legs shook. All doubts fell away. Amy's legs gave and I held her in my arms, pressing her body against mine to keep her upright. This whole thing could go wrong in so many ways. But I didn't care. This was a terrible idea. But I didn't care. This was a tremendous risk. But I didn't care. I didn't care about my father disinheriting me. I didn't care if my uncle exiled me. I didn't care about ruining my chances with Countess Fiona. I didn't care about the scandal or the whispers or the disapproval this could bring. I only cared about the

woman in my arms. Our lips separated. Amy sighed, a broad smile spreading across her face.

“If I’m dreaming, I don’t ever want to wake up.” She breathed.

“If we’re dreaming, then I fear the hangover we’re going to have when we wake. But that’s for later. But now is not later. Right now, I want to hold you.”

Now that the kiss had ended, I worried in silence. Had I made everything I needed to do riskier than it needed to be? But I hadn’t been able to restrain myself, and now I was committed. I prayed that I wouldn’t regret this decision.

And then Amy grasped me by the shoulders and leaned back, drawing us both down on the bed.

